



## U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

### Nicaragua

#### International Religious Freedom Report 2005

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion.

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

#### Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 49,998 square miles, and its population is approximately 5.4 million. More than 90 percent of the population belongs to Christian denominations. According to the most recent census, conducted in 1995, 72.9 percent of the population was Roman Catholic, 15.1 percent was evangelical, 1.5 percent belonged to the Moravian Church, and 0.1 percent was Episcopalian. Another 1.9 percent of persons surveyed were associated with other religious groups, including the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Amish and Mennonite communities, and Jehovah's Witnesses. Approximately 8.5 percent professed no religious affiliation or were atheists. The Episcopal Church claims a membership nearly twice that indicated in the census, and evangelical churches also have made credible claims of higher current membership ranging between 20 and 30 percent of the population. According to a March 2005 countrywide poll of 1,281 citizens, 57 percent of respondents were Catholic, 29 percent were members of evangelical or Protestant churches, 3 percent belonged to other denominations, and 11 percent claimed no religious affiliation.

Non-Christian communities are few and small. The Jewish community counts less than 50 persons (including expatriates). They gather for religious holidays and Sabbath dinners but do not have an ordained rabbi or a synagogue.

There are approximately 200 Muslims, who are primarily resident aliens or naturalized citizens from Iran, Libya, and Palestine who immigrated in the 1980s. There is a mosque in Managua, the capital, with approximately 100 members. Minority religions also include the Baha'i faith and the Church of Scientology.

Other immigrant groups include "Turcos," Palestinian Christians whose ancestors came to Central America in the early 1900s, and Chinese, who either arrived as Christians or frequently intermarried with citizens and converted to Christianity.

There are no longer any pre-Columbian religions, although there is a "freedom movement" within some Moravian churches to allow indigenous Amerindian spiritual expression, often through music. The Catholic Church frequently incorporates syncretistic elements and does not criticize or interfere with non Christian aspects of religious festivals held in its name. For example, each August up to 30,000 persons, many of them painted red or coated in motor oil, gather to carry "Dominguito," a sacred 10-inch statue of Saint Dominic, from his home church in a suburb of Managua to another church downtown. One week later, the revelers reconvene to carry the statue back. Such events have historical roots dating to pre-Colombian times.

Moravian and Episcopal communities are concentrated on the Atlantic coast, while Catholic and evangelical churches dominate the Pacific and central regions. There is a strong correlation between ethnicity and religion; blacks and Amerindians, who generally live along the Atlantic coast, are more likely to belong to the Moravian or Episcopal Church. Some evangelical churches have focused on the remote towns of the central South Atlantic Region and have a strong presence there.

Evangelical churches are growing rapidly, particularly in poor or remote areas. For example, in 1980 the Assemblies of God had 80 churches and fewer than 5,000 members. According to Church leader Saturnino Cerrato, as of April 2005, there were more than 860 churches and 200,000 baptized members. The evangelical churches operate two private universities without

interference from the Government.

Anecdotal evidence points to proportionally higher church attendance among members of the new evangelical churches than in Catholic and traditional Protestant churches. In poorer neighborhoods, the small evangelical churches are filled to capacity nearly every evening. According to a Catholic official, the Catholic Church is growing numerically but losing ground proportionally.

Foreign missionaries are active. The Mormons have 187 missionaries and 33,000 members in the country, and the Mennonites have a handful of missionary families and close to 5,000 members, mostly in the central Boaco region and rural areas around Waslala in the north. Nearly all of the non-Catholic denominations have at least one missionary family present.

## Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

### Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice. The Government at all levels strives to protect this right in full and does not tolerate its abuse, either by governmental or private actors. The Constitution also states that no one "shall be obligated by coercive measures to declare their ideology or beliefs." The Constitution prohibits discrimination on the basis of religion.

There is no official state religion; however, the Roman Catholic Church enjoys a close relationship with the Government. It is the most politically active religious denomination and has significant political influence. Catholic Church leaders routinely meet with senior government officials. There are allegations that state funds have been used to support purely religious Catholic Church activities; however, under the current administration the Government and Catholic Church have maintained more distant relations. The historical position of the Church is such that most religiously affiliated monuments, memorials, and holidays are Catholic-related. However, the dominance of the Catholic Church does not have a negative effect on the religious freedom of others.

Evangelicals are free to be politically active and have formed a political party called Partido Camino Cristiano, or Christian Path Party. The party has 3 legislators in the 92-member National Assembly, including an ordained evangelical minister.

The Government's requirements for legal recognition of a religious group are similar to requirements for other nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). A church must apply for "Personeria Juridica" (legal standing), which the National Assembly must approve. Following approval, a church must register with the Ministry of Government as an association or a foundation. Groups that do not register cannot obtain tax-exempt status and technically do not have standing to incur legal obligations and make contracts. However, a number of groups have not registered and continue to operate without penalty.

A recognized church may be granted tax-exempt status, known as exoneration. Because of perceived unequal treatment for different religious groups, exoneration is a contentious issue. This is particularly true with regard to exemption from customs duties on imported goods donated for humanitarian purposes. Goods donated to established churches and other nonprofit religious organizations recognized by the Government that are intended for the exclusive use of the church or organization are eligible for exoneration. Groups must receive clearance from the Office of External Cooperation, the Ministry of Finance, the Customs Office, and the municipality in which the donated goods would be used before a tax exemption is approved and the goods are released.

In the past, some churches and other nonprofit religious organizations, among them the Assemblies of God, reported bureaucratic delays in obtaining customs exemptions, and some complained that the Catholic Church received preferential treatment and did not face the same requirements applied to other religious and humanitarian organizations. However, some Catholic groups, including Catholic Relief Services, reported similar bureaucratic problems in obtaining customs exemptions. In 2003, the National Assembly approved a tax equity law that attempted to streamline the exoneration process. Under the law, all groups were required to requalify for exoneration. Many churches and other nonprofit religious organizations reported that the new law generally streamlined the exoneration process in practice; however, some maintained that the Catholic Church still received preferential treatment and did not have to carry out the same requirements as other religious and humanitarian organizations.

In 2002, the Government closed down radio station La Poderosa when it determined that its license, held by the Commission for the Promotion of the Archdiocese (COPROSA), was invalid because COPROSA had not completed the requirements to register with the Ministry of Government as an NGO. La Poderosa made broadcasts in which hosts and callers made physical threats against President Bolanos and other public officials. Other media and some political leaders criticized the closing of La Poderosa and stressed the need for media to follow ethical standards and engage in better self-regulation.

Missionaries do not face special entry requirements other than obtaining religious worker visas, which are routinely provided. During the period covered by this report, there were no reports of difficulties in obtaining religious worker visas. However, the process takes several months and must be completed before the missionary arrives.

Religion is not taught in public schools; however, private religious schools operate in the country. The Government provides financial support to a number of Catholic primary and secondary schools by paying teacher salaries.

The following holy days are recognized as national holidays: Holy Thursday, Good Friday, Easter, Immaculate Conception, and Christmas. The Festival of Santo Domingo (August 1 and 10) is also celebrated; however, these are holidays only in Managua.

#### Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

#### Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

#### Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

#### Section III. Societal Attitudes

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom. Relations among religions differ between the two coasts. On the Atlantic side, where the three dominant churches are the Moravian, Episcopal, and Catholic, there is an ecumenical spirit; the churches even are known to celebrate the Eucharist (Communion) together. However, on the Pacific side, ecumenism is rare, and there is continuing and energetic competition for adherents between the Catholic and evangelical churches.

#### Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The Embassy continued to maintain a regular dialogue with the principal religious leaders and organizations.

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[International Religious Freedom Report Home Page](http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2005/51647.htm)